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Why people resort to coercion: The role of utility and legitimacy

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Abstract

This study focuses on why people may resort to coercive tactics. We tested the proposition that considerations of utility and legitimacy mediate effects of a powerholder's competence and reward structure on the use of coercion. Results showed that in general coercive tactics are employed less often than softer tactics, that coercive tactics are used more by more competent individuals than by less competent individuals, and that coercive tactics are used more often when the revenues of task performance benefited the agent of power than when they benefited both agent and target or when they benefited the target solely. Results identified perceived utility and perceived legitimacy as mediators of the decision to coerce the other or not. Copyright © 2006 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Throughout history people seem motivated to gain it, not to lose it, take it from others, wield it, and sometimes even to abuse it: Power. In social psychology, recent years have witnessed a re-emerging interest in power and its consequences, origins, and concomitants (for a review see Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003). Although this revitalization has not yet yielded consensus on the nature and the definition of power, most researchers conceptualize power as a social phenomenon that takes place between interdependent people. One may speak of power when a person (i.e., the powerholder) is capable of affecting the outcomes or behavior of (an) other person(s) (Fiske, Morling, & Stevens, 1996; Goodwin, Operario, & Fiske, 1998; Pruitt & Carnevale, 1993; Tjosvold, Coleman, & Sun, 2003). Within this perspective, power is seen as a potential, that is, a resource that may or may not be used.

The focus in the majority of more recent studies on power appears to be on the intra-individual effects of the mere possession of power (e.g., Anderson & Berdahl, 2002; Fiske, 1993; Galinsky, Gruenfeld, & Magee, 2003; Keltner et al., 2003; Richeson & Ambady, 2003). Unfortunately, much less attention is devoted to power in action or, in other words, to *the actual use of power*. However, because the dynamics of power use play such an important part in our understanding of power, we argue that this issue deserves more attention. Moreover, we also argue for *process-oriented* research on power use. Research that focuses on *why* people employ power may greatly advance our understanding of social

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interaction between people, for instance, because it may help to explain established findings, and also may help to find other, not yet identified, determinants of the use of coercive tactics.

Accordingly, in the present study we aim to draw research attention to the use of power and to psychological processes that underlie it. More specifically, we concentrate on what may be called the ultimate demonstration of power: The use of coercion. We argue that two considerations play a significant role in the use of coercion: subjective *utility* and subjective *legitimacy*. In the present research we investigate two determinants of powerholders' decision to be coercive in a task performance situation: (1) The relative task competence of the powerholder, and (2) the extent to which rewards for task performance accrue to the powerholder, the other person, or both. We will focus specifically on the extent to which perceived *utility* and perceived *legitimacy* may explain the relationship between competence and coercion as well as the relationship between reward structure and coercion.

POWER USE

Power, or the ability to influence the outcomes or behaviors of others, implies the capacity to control and to dominate (Hollander, 1992). Indeed, the demonstration of power often lies in the capacity to make others do things that they would not necessarily have done on their own accord (Kipnis, 1976; Vecchio, 1997). Power may thus manifest itself through the employment of strong influence tactics like coercion, pressure, or force. Unsurprisingly, coercive tactics usually are considered to be relatively unfriendly and socially undesirable (Raven, 1992; Yukl & Tracy, 1992). People object to being forced against their will, to be denied valuable resources, or to be told what to do. As a result, the use of coercive tactics is likely to place more strain on the relationship between powerholder and target than the use of softer tactics (e.g., persuasion, ingratiation, requesting) that allow the other more leeway (Bruins, Ellemers, & de Gilder, 1999; Somech & Drach-Zahavy, 2002; van Knippenberg & Steensma, 2003; van Knippenberg, van Knippenberg, Blaauw, & Vermunt, 1999). Whereas people may use soft tactics more or less by default, strong power tactics may not be used so lightly. As a consequence, a key question regarding the determinants of the use of power is when and why people are willing to resort to the use of coercion rather than the use of softer means of influence.

Some insight into conditions that enhance the likelihood of the use of coercive tactics are found in earlier studies. Several studies show that the direction of influence affects the use of strong and soft power tactics (Erez, Rim, & Keider, 1986; Kipnis, Schmidt, & Wilkinson, 1980; Yukl & Falbe, 1990; Yukl, Falbe, & Youn, 1993; Yukl & Tracy, 1992). Differential use of power tactics has also been found for various objectives of influence attempts (Buss, Gomes, Higgins, & Lauterbach, 1987; Erez et al., 1986; Kipnis et al., 1980; Yukl, Guinan, & Sottolano, 1995), for people having high versus low self-esteem (Schwarzwald & Koslowsky, 1999), for individuals having high versus low status (Stahelski & Paynton, 1995), for individuals scoring high versus low on the Machiavellianism scale (Falbo, 1977; Farmer et al., 1997; Grams & Rogers, 1990; Vecchio & Sussmann, 1991), for people expecting versus not expecting future interaction (van Knippenberg & Steensma, 2003), for transactional and transformational leadership styles (Deluga & Souza, 1991), for different levels of education (Farmer Maslyn, Fedor, & Goodman 1997), for ingroup versus outgroup targets (Bruins, 1997), and for different cultural and social norms (Fu & Yukl, 2000; Xin & Tsui, 1996).

Of course, several mediators may explain the effects of the above-mentioned determinants on the use of coercive tactics. In this respect, we assert that one of the key variables pertains to the expectation that the use of coercion will contribute to a desired outcome. In particular, we suggest that the use of coercive tactics is likely to be affected by factors that instigate considerations of *utility.*

We conceptualize utility as the perceived usefulness of wielding power, that is, as the assessment of the benefits that the use of power may bring. Despite the intuitive appeal of the proposed role of considerations of utility, there is, to our knowledge, no empirical evidence that this is actually the case. In the present study, we take on a broad spectrum perspective on usefulness and acknowledge that the usefulness of wielding power may relate to a variety of different goals (e.g., self-interest goals, or goals associated with the common interest, with cohesiveness, or with conflict management, etc). Additionally, we propose that the decision to actually use power is also instigated by considerations of *fairness and justifiability* (i.e., am I within my rights to use power?). Thus, coercion is more likely when the circumstances lead people to feel that it is somehow legitimate to behave in this way.

COMPETENCE, UTILITY, AND LEGITIMACY

Several studies relate competence differentials to power and influence processes in task groups. First, group members often assume that the more controlling and assertive group members are the most expert (Bunderson, 2003; Littlepage & Mueller, 1997; Littlepage & Silbiger, 1992), and that they deem others' competence as inferior to their own (Tepper, Eisenbach, Kirby, & Potter, 1998). Second, more competent group members participate more actively in group tasks (Karakowsky & McBey, 2001; Ridgeway, Johnson, & Diekema, 1994), are more influential in group decisions (Oldmeadow, Platow, Foddy, & Anderson, 2003; Skvoretz, 1985), and use (coercive) power tactics more often than less competent group members (de Gilder & Wilke, 1994; van Knippenberg, van Eijbergen, & Wilke, 1999; van Knippenberg, van Knippenberg, & Wilke, 2001).

We propose that expected usefulness of strong tactics may account for the effect of competence on coercion. This proposition is corroborated by Expectation States Theory (Berger, Webster, Ridgeway, & Rosenholtz, 1986; Berger, Webster, & Zelditch, 1985; Ridgeway, 2003). This theory states that in cooperative groups, the differentiation of group members on a valued characteristic such as competence leads to conceptions of one's own and others' capacities to make useful contributions to the group task. Group members with relatively high task competence will expect that their potential task contributions have a higher utility than those of the others and are therefore worth making, which results in more competent group members being more inclined to wield power than less competent group members.

Apart from these utility concerns, competence differentials may elicit fairness-related concerns (cf. De Cremer & Sedikides, 2005; De Cremer & Tyler, 2005; van Prooijen, van den Bos, & Wilke, 2002). According to Ridgeway, Diekema, and Johnson (1995) shared, collective beliefs about performance or status may legitimize the existence of a power and influence hierarchy that is congruent with these performance or status expectations. Ridgeway and Berger (1986) suggest that legitimized power and prestige positions, based on shared performance expectations, have a normative, moral quality which makes behavior incongruent with those positions something that is not merely unexpected but also something that should not happen. One aspect of a legitimate power and prestige order is the right to engage in directive behavior or the right to exercise control over another person (Ridgeway, 2003; Ridgeway et al., 1995; Ridgeway et al., 1994). It may thus be argued that dominance and control over others' outcomes and behavior, as achieved through coercion, needs more justification than the employment of softer tactics. Less competent group members are less likely to have gained control or dominance rights than higher competent group members. This suggests that the use of coercion is more likely to be regarded as legitimate or fair when the powerholder is a competent group member than when he or she is a relatively incompetent group member (cf. Bruins et al., 1999).

REWARD STRUCTURE, UTILITY, AND LEGITIMACY

Reward allocation systems describe the division of compensation amongst task performers and they regularly lead to a differential pay-off in case of successful task performance. For instance, organizational profits may result in the allotment of bonds and shares to higher management only, and reaching some designated team goal may lead to a promotion for the team leader and not for the other team members. Reward allocation systems are usually aimed at motivating employees to put in extra effort by stimulating the perceived usefulness of working harder in light of the potential to obtain extra rewards. Indeed, reward allocation systems are one of the more prominent defining characteristics of organizational structure and culture, and they have a profound effect on individual and organizational functioning and effectiveness (Campbell & Campbell, 1988; Kanungo & Mendonca, 1997; Williams, Malos, & Palmer, 2002).

We propose that the likelihood of people using coercive tactics is affected by reward allocation, and that this relationship is mediated by the expected utility of coercion. People will be more willing to use coercive tactics, thereby running the risk of a damaged relationship with the target, the more they expect to personally profit from successful task performance. Social decision making literature also suggests that the expected outcome is an important factor in people's willingness to take risks (March & Shapira, 1987; Sitkin & Weingart, 1995). People are generally risk aversive, and they will avoid risky behavior unless they see some advantage (i.e., the achievement of higher personal outcomes) in risk taking (Forlani & Mullins, 2000; Rajgopal & Shevlin, 2002; Stewart & Roth, 2001). Hence, we expect that the risk of using coercion (i.e., a damaged relationship with the target) may be offset by an expected increase in personal gain.

We also expect legitimacy concerns to mediate the effects of reward allocation on coercion. Social and organizational psychology present several theories that assert that whenever a person's own interest is involved it is fair that he or she should be able to exert some control. For example, social justice literature suggests that people whose outcomes are at stake consider it fair to be able to participate in the process leading to a decision or to have some control over decisions that are made (e.g., Greenberg & Folger, 1983; Lind & Tyler, 1988). Similar arguments are made in literature on empowerment, the formation of democratic workgroups, and job design (e.g., Argyris, 1998; Conger & Kanungo, 1988; Hackman & Oldham, 1976; Karasek & Theorell, 1990; Kirkman & Rosen, 1999). Likewise, we propose that because coercion is associated with claiming control for oneself and taking away control from the other, the use of coercive tactics is likely to vary with reward structure. Indeed, coercion is more justifiable when it is legitimized by the fact that one's own outcomes are at stake. When rewards are mainly attributed to the other person there is less justification for the use of tactics that restrain the other's ability to exercise control over own outcomes and behavior, and hence the powerholder is less likely to resort to them.

Hypotheses relating to the above arguments were tested in a laboratory experiment in which, during task performance, participants could choose between using a coercive tactic or a softer power tactic *vis-à-vis* a co-worker. We manipulated competence and reward structure, and assessed perceived utility as well as perceived legitimacy of the use of strong power tactics.

METHOD

Design and Participants

We randomly assigned 92 Dutch students (26 males and 66 females; mean age = 21.77, $SD = 2.58$) to conditions of a 2 (Competence: higher vs. lower) × 3 (Reward Structure: self vs. both self and other vs. other) factorial design, and paid them €5 for their voluntary cooperation.

Procedure

Participants were invited to take part in a study on 'decision making.' Upon arrival they were placed in individual cubicles containing a computer. This computer was used to present instructions and task assignments, to offer feedback, and to register the dependent measures. Participants were informed that an individual task was to be followed by a task in which computer-mediated contact with one of the other participants would be established. In reality, all contact between participants was simulated.

In the individual task, participants had to estimate the number of black squares in 10 checker-board grids containing 180 black and white squares arranged in a random pattern. This estimation task was said to measure 'contrast-sensitivity.'

Then, allegedly based on the accuracy of estimations, we gave participants bogus feedback about their competence relative to the competence of their 'partner.' In the *high competence* condition we emphasized that the participants did better in estimating the number of black squares than the other did (they themselves scored 85 points and the other scored 53 points on a contrast-sensitivity scale ranging from 0 to 100). In contrast, we told participants in the *low competence* condition that they did worse than the other (i.e., their own and other's score was 53 and 85 points, respectively).

Instructions for the dyadic and last task were given subsequently. Again, estimates of the number of black squares in checker-board grids were to be made (note that the induced competence differentials were thus relevant to the dyadic task). Participants were told that the better the joint estimations of themselves and their partner, the more additional money they could earn (up to about €2.50). However, the distribution of these extra earnings varied per condition of the Reward Structure manipulation. Participants were told that that, as in many situations in daily life, the profits of a good task result (1) would be divided equally between themselves and the other (*both self and other*); (2) would only benefit themselves (*self*), or; (3) would only benefit the other person (*other*).

Participants were informed that in the second task one person per dyad would be given the opportunity to control the behavior of the co-worker. Participants were led to believe that they were the one selected randomly by computer to be in this position of power. Following each of the 12 trials, participants gave a personal estimate and were under the impression that their partner did the same (although this estimation was not revealed to them). Subsequently, they were given the opportunity to choose one of two options as a means of controling the behavior of their co-worker: (1) to give advice or (2) to use coercion. The first option may be regarded as a choice to employ a soft tactic, as it was emphasized that the other person was free to follow or disregard the advice. The second option constituted the use of a strong power tactic. If this option was chosen the other person's initial answer would be replaced by the answer forced upon him or her by the participant. Thus, as in other studies on power and the use of hard versus soft tactics, participants could either force or advise the other person (Bruins et al., 1999; de Gilder & Wilke, 1994; van Knippenberg, van Eijbergen et al., 1999; van Knippenberg et al., 2001; van Knippenberg & Steensma, 2003).

The main dependent variable, *frequency of coercion*, was defined as the number of times participants decided to use a coercive tactic (minimum of 0 times, maximum of 12 times). Following the completion of the second task, participants completed a short questionnaire. Here participants were asked how much control they thought they exerted over the outcome when they advised the other, and when they imposed estimates upon the other ($1 = $ *very little*; $7 = $ *very much*). As a check of the competence manipulation we asked participants how well they performed relative to the other on the contrast-sensitivity task ($1 = I$ *was much worse*; $7 = I$ *was much better*). As a check of the manipulation of reward structure we asked the participants whose financial interest was served the most by a good joint result ($1 = $ *the other*; $7 = $ *me*). To measure perceived legitimacy participants were asked how justified and how fair they considered the employment of strong power tactics to be ($1 = $ *not at all*; $7 = $ *very much*; $r = 0.89$, $p < 0.001$). Participants were also asked how useful they considered the employment of

Table 1. Means of the main dependent variables for the experimental conditions

Reward Structure	Use of coercion	Perceived utility	Perceived legitimacy
		High Competence	
Other as recipient	2.25	3.50	2.63
Self and Other recipients	2.78	3.27	2.33
Self as recipient	5.13	4.20	4.17
		Low Competence	
Other as recipient	0.94	1.73	2.27
Self and Other recipients	1.93	1.80	2.50
Self as recipient	3.32	3.00	3.28

strong power tactics to be (1 = *not at all*; 7 = *very much*).[1] At the end of the experiment, participants were paid and thoroughly debriefed.

RESULTS

All reported ANOVAs used a 2 (Competence) × 3 (Reward Structure) full factorial design. Table 1 reports the means of the main dependent variables per experimental condition.

Manipulation Checks

As intended, participants indicated that they exerted more control by forcing an answer on the other ($M = 6.11$) than by giving advice to the other ($M = 3.61$; $t(91) = 9.32$, $p < 0.001$). Participants in the high competence condition considered their own performance in the contrast-sensitivity task to be better than that of the other ($M = 5.67$), while participants in the low competence condition considered their performance to be relatively poor ($M = 1.91$; $F(1,86) = 721.72$, $p < 0.0001$, $\eta^2 = 0.89$). Also, participants indicated that they had significantly more financial interest ($M = 6.61$) in the task, when the outcomes were allocated to themselves, than when task outcomes were allocated to both self and other ($M = 3.80$). Participants in the latter condition considered their financial interest to be greater than participants in the condition where task outcomes were allocated to the other ($M = 1.32$; $F(2,86) = 208.71$, $p < 0.0001$, $\eta^2 = 0.83$). No other effects were found. We conclude that all manipulations were successful.

Frequency of Coercion

To determine whether soft tactics were indeed used more often than strong tactics we subtracted the number of times that strong power tactics would have been used if strong and soft power tactics were used equally often (6 times) from the number of times that strong power tactics were actually used. The significant constant-effect on the ANOVA ($M = -3.28$; $F(1,86) = 106.70$, $p < 0.0001$, $\eta^2 = 0.55$),

[1]A Principal Components Analysis with Varimax rotation of the items of legitimacy and usefulness yielded a two-factor solution, accounting for 94% of the variance, with items loading |0.84| or higher on the intended scale and cross-loadings below |0.44|.

indicated that soft tactics were indeed employed more often than strong ones. This finding is congruent with the results of other studies (Rule, Bisanz, & Kohn, 1985; van Knippenberg & Steensma, 2003; van Knippenberg, van Eijbergen et al., 1999; Yukl, Guinan, & Sottolano, 1995).

An ANOVA on the *frequency of coercion* variable revealed the expected main effects of Competence ($M = 2.09$; $F(1,86) = 4.26$, $p < 0.05$, $\eta^2 = 0.05$) and Reward Structure ($F(2,86) = 6.13$, $p < 0.005$, $\eta^2 = 0.13$). Coercive tactics were indeed employed more often by highly competent individuals ($M = 3.35$) than by less competent individuals. In addition, coercive tactics were used more often when self was the recipient of rewards ($M = 4.19$) than when either the other was the recipient ($M = 1.61$), or both self and other were recipients ($M = 2.33$).[2]

Mediational Analysis

We expected perceived usefulness and perceived legitimacy to mediate the effects of Competence and Reward Structure. To be identified as a mediator (a) variations in levels of the independent variable should account for variations in the presumed mediator, (b) variations in the mediator should account for variations in the dependent variable, and (c) when controlled for the effect of the presumed mediator, a previously significant effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable should be significantly reduced and, for full mediation, should be no longer significant (Baron & Kenny, 1986).

The results of the ANOVA on perceived usefulness of coercive tactics showed that participants in the high competence condition considered coercion more useful ($M = 3.65$) than participants in the low competence condition ($M = 2.20$; $F(1,86) = 18.40$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.18$). Additionally, coercive tactics were considered most useful when rewards were allocated to self, and least useful when rewards were allocated to both self and other ($M_{self} = 3.58$, $M_{both} = 2.53$, $M_{other} = 2.65$; $F(2,86) = 3.99$, $p < 0.05$. $\eta^2 = 0.09$). A subsequent ANCOVA on the use of coercive tactics with usefulness as the covariate ($F(1,85) = 51.64$, $p < 0.001$, for the regression), reduced all formally significant effects to non-significance (for Competence and Reward Structure: $F(1,85) = 0.43$, $p > 0.05$; and $F(2,85) = 2.89$, $p > 0.05$, respectively). In addition, both Sobel-tests were significant ($z = 3.70$, $p < 0.005$; and $z = 2.23$, $p < 0.05$, respectively). Hence, we conclude that perceived usefulness mediates the effects of both Competence and Reward Structure.

An ANOVA with perceived legitimacy as dependent variable indicated that participants considered the use of a coercive tactic to be more legitimate when they themselves were the only recipients of the task outcome ($M = 3.69$) than when the other was the only recipient of the task outcome ($M = 2.44$), or than when the outcome of task performance benefited both self and other ($M = 2.42$; $F(2,86) = 5.74$, $p < 0.005$, $\eta^2 = 0.12$). However, highly competent group members did not consider the use of a strong tactic significantly more legitimate than less competent group members ($M = 3.04$ vs. $M = 2.66$; $F(1,86) = 1.22$, $p > 0.05$, $\eta^2 = 0.01$). An ANCOVA with the frequency of coercive tactic use as the dependent variable and perceived legitimacy as the covariate ($F(1,85) = 43.60$, $p < 0.001$, for the regression) revealed that formerly significant effects were no longer significant (for Competence and Reward Structure: $F(1,85) = 3.02$, $p > 0.05$; and $F(2,85) = 2.00$, $p > 0.05$, respectively). In addition, Sobel-tests were non-significant for Competence ($z = 1.08$, $p > 0.05$), and significant for Reward Structure ($z = 3.66$, $p < 0.01$). On the basis of these results we conclude that legitimacy mediates the effect of Reward Structure. However, because Competence had no effect on perceived legitimacy and

[2]When a generalized linear model that controls for the poisson distributedness of the frequency of coercive tactic employment variable is used, the results lead to the same conclusions as with the reported ANOVA. Both Reward Structure and Competence have significant main effects (χ^2 (2) = 54.12, $p < 0.0001$, and $t(88) = 3.82$, $p < 0.0001$, respectively), while the interaction again is non-significant.

the Sobel-test was non-significant, we conclude that legitimacy does not mediate the effect of Competence.[3]

DISCUSSION

Starting from the observation that research on power pays insufficient attention to the actual use of power, the present study concentrated on antecedents and mediators of the use of coercive tactics. We argued that two key considerations underlying the use of coercive tactics concern the subjective utility and legitimacy of power use. This analysis in terms of perceived utility and legitimacy may help explain well-established findings, such as those describing the relationship between the powerholders' task competence and power use, and may also help to identify other determinants of the use of coercive tactics such as reward structure. The results of the present study largely support our analysis.

First, we found that more competent powerholders coerced their co-worker more often than less competent powerholders. Importantly, we found evidence for the mediating role of perceived usefulness of strong tactic use. Our results seemingly support the idea that more competent individuals consider their own contributions to the group's task more valuable or useful than less competent individuals. However, we did not find evidence for the mediating role of perceived legitimacy of strong tactic use. This deviates from what is implied by earlier research in the Expectation States Theory tradition (e.g., Ridgeway et al., 1995; Ridgeway et al., 1994). An explanation for this discrepancy may lie in the fact that earlier research focused on reactions of the target of the influence attempt, whereas we have focused more on the power wielder him- or herself. Specifically, the target of influence may be more focused on the legitimacy of behavior of others (with higher or lower status) than that the powerholder is focused on own behavior. In other words, perceptions of fairness may be more pronounced in evaluations by targets than in evaluations by agents (Molm, Quist, & Wiseley, 1994). Future research may shed more light on this issue.

Second, we found that reward structure affected the decision to use coercive tactics. When rewards are allocated to self, coercive tactics are more often employed than when rewards are allocated to the other. Apparently, people are more prepared to exercise power when their own outcomes are at stake than when other's outcomes are at stake. As expected, the perceived usefulness of strong influence tactic employment mediated this effect. Clearly, outcomes accruing fully to self have higher subjective utility than outcomes (partly) accruing to the target (cf. Vroom, 1964). Perceived legitimacy also mediated the effect of reward structure. This finding is of importance, because it shows that powerholders care about being fair and just. Evidently, power may corrupt some people in some circumstances (Kipnis, 1976), but others may not use their power so lightly and without concern for the other party. Instead they may be influenced by fairness considerations in their decision to wield power or not. Although power may involve the *awareness* that one can act at will with lessened chance of having to face interference of social consequences (Keltner et al., 2003), people's *actual use* of coercive tactics is contingent on considerations that derive from the social context (Chen, Lee-Chai, & Bargh, 2001).

Third, the present experiment replicated the finding that people generally employ more soft (e.g., ingratiation, inspirational appeals, consultation, and rationality) than hard influence tactics (e.g., pressure, legitimating tactics, coalition; Douglas & Gardner, 2004; Rule et al., 1985; Schwarzwald, Koslowsky, & Ochana-Levin, 2004; van Knippenberg, van Knippenberg et al., 1999; Yukl et al., 1995). However, it is

[3]We also conducted an ANCOVA with both legitimacy and usefulness as the covariates to make certain that results for the one mediator are not due to a correlation with the other mediator. Results show that both covariates indeed have a unique effect ($t(84) = 3.79$; $p < 0.001$; and $t(84) = 4.53$; $p < 0.001$, respectively). Again, formally significant effects were no longer significant (for Competence and Reward Structure: $F(1,84) = 0.03$, $p > 0.05$; and $F(2,84) = 1.77$, $p > 0.05$, respectively).

worth noting that most of the previous evidence of such an effect derives primarily from studies relying on subjective ratings of tactic use, which may be distorted by the tendency to respond in a socially desirable way. In the present study we investigated actual behavior, and we were thus able to show that there is a genuine preference for soft over strong power tactics.

Our study is not without weaknesses and limitations. For instance, experimental research of this form may raise doubt about the external validity of its findings. However, experiments are not conducted in a quest for external validity but rather to test theory (Brown & Lord, 1999; Mook, 1983), and combinations of laboratory experiments and field research typically suggest that the lab and the field yield similar results (Dipboye, 1990—note that our experiment also replicated results from field studies). Nonetheless, replication of the results in a field setting would be valuable.

Second, our study gives rise to several questions that may be addressed in future research. For instance, it may be interesting to develop more theory and research on temporal aspects in the use of coercive tactics. Often people start out by using soft tactics, and if they find out that this does not lead to compliance they then switch to the use of stronger ones (Yukl et al., 1993). Based on the present results, it may be expected that both high competence as well as agent-oriented reward structures would lead to a swifter shift from the use of soft tactics to the use of hard tactics.

Third, we defined the concept of utility rather broadly. It reflected the general extent to which the use of coercion was expected to have the desired effect. Future research may dissect this concept more precisely and investigate whether utility considerations relating to self-interest or utility considerations relating to task performance, are the stronger mediator.

Lastly, there may also be other concerns that guide the decision to use power. Turner (2005) for instance argues that coercion happens when one cannot influence (i.e., persuade others, realize cognitive change) or claim legitimate authority rights (based on voluntary deference of the target). He proposes that coercion is more likely when shared identity based persuasion fails or is unlikely to happen (cf. Bruins, 1997). While it seems unlikely that such identity mechanisms were at play in the present study (i.e., coercion differed markedly between the outcome to self and the outcome to other conditions, but it seems implausible that these conditions differed in the level of shared identity), exploring identity dynamics seems a worthwhile avenue for future research.

Turner (2005) also asserts that coercion leads to further disidentification, increased social distance and conflict, and that it reduces the chance that the power wielder will ever be able to influence or claim authority rights again. Interestingly, recent empirical studies suggest important qualifications to this general proposition. While there is indeed evidence that the use of coercion may damage relationships (Falbe & Yukl, 1992; Yukl & Tracy, 1992), this mainly seems to hold for agents that are not part of the shared identity (Ellemers, van Rijswijk, Bruins, & de Gilder, 1998; van Knippenberg & van Knippenberg, 2003). Clearly, the interplay between self construal, power use, and consequences of power use needs to be studied more extensively in order to clarify these dynamics.

To conclude, as we acknowledged earlier, research with a focus on the effects of the mere possession of power is accumulating rapidly, while research concentrating on the dynamic aspect of power, that is, actual power use, is quite rare. Clearly though, both lines of research are needed for a better understanding of power. We therefore hope that the present research will encourage more researchers to study when and how power is used than has previously been the case.

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